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READ-ALOUDS AND CULTURAL ACTIVITIES FOR THE ELEMENTARY
SPANISH TEACHER

by

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A capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master
of Arts in Teaching

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To my family, friends and students

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Guiding Question

This project strives to answer the question: *How can second language (L2) teachers help students use their own cultural background knowledge in order to connect language and culture through reading?* It will examine research and methodology around literacy in second language classrooms which addresses both cultural and linguistic competencies. I am writing about cultural inferences made by L2 learners when reading because I intend to show that understanding cultural references improves linguistic knowledge such as lexis (vocabulary) acquisition, understanding of grammatical structures and pronunciation. These findings will address the practical applications for second language teachers by explaining how they can help learners connect to language and culture through reading. My project will include read-alouds, assessments and teaching activities. I will examine four aspects of L2 reading: (a) the overall benefits of reading on both cultural and language acquisition; (b) the value of activating background knowledge and Schema theory; (c) the types of inferences and the problems associated with making incorrect inferences; (d) and the role that culture plays in all of these themes.

This chapter will address the professional reasons for this particular project, the personal connections to second language acquisition, culture and reading, the practical applications for second language teachers, and provide an overview of the chapter.

Professional Significance

As a teacher with twelve years experience in working with young language learners of English and Spanish, I have found that literacy is a powerful skill to cultivate in my students. The ability to navigate the written word in a new language is practical for classroom usage and empowering for students out of the classroom. Students who are most engaged in learning, I have found, are those who take what they have learned and apply it to a new context when they leave class. They teach their family members, show off by reading menus and ordering in restaurants and even act as tour guides when they are on vacation. Many of these acts require reading skills to accomplish, but also another skill set: cultural competence.

According to Rodriques (2000), linguistic and cultural competence are intertwined. They are connected through many years of rich history including the customs and perspectives of its native speakers. When students only learn about language, they miss the very essence of language. Second language teachers often focus on lexical or grammatical knowledge but eschew teaching about culture, or simply teach stereotypical culture such as food and holidays. Both scenarios are undesirable as they leave students with shallow understandings of the people and places where the language they are learning exist. L2 teachers, therefore, should strive to guide their students toward

both linguistic and cultural competence, but how are these goals best accomplished simultaneously?

Reading is a proven way for learners to improve their lexicons, or vocabularies (Krashen, 1989, 1993). However, our understanding of exactly *how* reading aids vocabulary acquisition is not complete (Pulido, 2004). Some research suggests the use of authentic texts (Young, 1991), narrative texts that tell a story (Pulido, 2004), or through free reading (Krashen, 2013). Cultural information can also be acquired through reading; this works best when taught in tandem with awareness of the students' own home culture (Nguyen, 2017). While there has not been a host of published research on this topic, it is common knowledge among many teachers, although not always common practice. As a result, culture is not explicitly taught in many second language classrooms. Teachers may gloss over a cultural event when reading a book aloud to the class and assume that students will glean its importance without specifically learning about it. The result of this is often incorrect inferences made by students which can lead to confusion and the acquisition of misinformation. In time, if these erroneous cultural assumptions are not corrected, students may find themselves ill equipped for communication in the language they have studied. Students may encounter embarrassing situations, such as asking for directions to a taco restaurant in Spain, a Spanish-speaking country where *tortilla* means a potato omelette, not a flat corn or flour wrap. Ensuring correct cultural inferences while reading is one way for teachers to help combat these types of future encounters.

In the past three years, I have become very interested in how my young learners begin to read in Spanish. For three year, I taught the same students from Kindergarten

through second grade so I was able to chart their progress year after year. At the beginning of my second year, as my second grade class was moving on to work with another Spanish teacher, he commented to me that my students were *far better* readers than his fifth grade class. I started to wonder how that could be possible since reading was not a specific focus of my second grade curriculum. In doing some research about early literacy, I came to understand that being spoken to in natural speech and hearing stories read aloud actually improves literacy skills by giving listeners support, activating background and vocabulary knowledge and providing engagement (Cooper et al, 2012). I began to wonder if culture could similarly be acquired through effective reading practices. This project will explore this idea and provide a path toward cultural competence through literacy.

Personal Connections

I have loved the Spanish language since I was very young, when my father drove past a farm and pointed out that the animals had special names: *caballo*, *vaca*, *gato*. I became completely obsessed with Spanish from that point on. I was so desperate to learn all I could that I even petitioned the elementary school principal to allow me to retake the 2-week introductory summer course, even though I was far from a beginner at that point. I recently ran into the brilliant summer school teacher who taught this class and she reminded me of my passion for learning, even as a 12-year-old.

As I grew up, my excitement about Spanish took on a more academic tone. I was so eager to learn about this wonderful language and its many cultures that instead of studying, I would spend time translating songs into Spanish or photocopying the glossary

from my textbook, just in case I needed to look up a word over the summer. Moving into college, it was a clear choice for Spanish Literature to be my area of focus. After graduating, moving to Spain also seemed like the most natural step. Living in Barcelona for eight years taught me many things; one of the most important being how essential cultural competence is to understanding a language. In Barcelona, two languages and cultures, Catalan and Spanish, compete for dominance. While both languages are used commonly, Catalan is the official language of most businesses, government agencies, and the preferred language among the majority of the locals. Knowing virtually nothing about the Catalan language or culture when I arrived put me at a significant disadvantage, even though I spoke and read Spanish fluently.

Despite the steep learning curve, I was able to make a career teaching English in Barcelona. One of the cornerstones of my pedagogy was English language books. The use of these authentic reading materials formed the basis for many lessons on pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar and also culture. My students learned about Halloween through Erica Silverman's *Big Pumpkin*. They discovered through Marion Walter's *Little Rabbit's Loose Tooth* that unlike their *Ratoncito Perez*, the little mouse who collected children's discarded teeth, we have a Tooth Fairy who comes to take away the tooth and leave a little prize. Both young learners and adults alike were fascinated by learning about the cultural differences presented in these children's stories. I began to see that teaching about cultural events as well as language was essential. I realized that language teaching could not exist in isolation and that weaving culture into each lesson was necessary.

Practical Application

Teachers who wish to make the shift away from separate culture and language curriculums or away from tokenism in teaching about culture would benefit from a template to follow. One practical way to improve the teaching of culture for young learners is through literacy and specifically read-alouds. For teachers to accomplish this goal, they will need a comprehensive curriculum that includes a list of Spanish language books that are level and age appropriate with a cultural focus and a wide variety of communication-based activities that promote critical thinking. There is a host of children's books available for second language teachers to use in their classrooms with rich cultural significance. *El fandango de Lola* by Anna Witte is such a gem. In this colorful and vibrant story, a young girl discovers her mother's dance shoes. She has never seen her mother use them and does not even know the dance, *el fandango*, that they are used for. Through the onomatopoeic telling of her story, Lola learns how to dance *el fandango* just like her mother and is given a special piece of her family's history. Students listening to this story are given a unique opportunity to see and hear about a Spanish family tradition. The techniques that are used to teach about Lola's story from Spain can be transferred to books about Mexican, Cuban, Peruvian or any Spanish-speaking culture.

Along with the storybook itself, second language teachers who wish to teach culture through reading will benefit from pre-reading and post-reading activities as well as guiding questions during the reading. Pre-reading might take the form of guided questioning in order for the teacher to ascertain students' vocabulary and cultural

knowledge as well as activate linguistic and cultural knowledge about the book's topic. During reading, questions could be graded based on students' levels, such as "What is this?" "Where are they?" or "How does she feel?" Post-reading activities could allow students to make connections from the story to their own home culture through drawings, comparisons and conversations.

This project will be an informed plan for Spanish teachers to follow throughout the school year. These will include activities that engage prior knowledge, ignite curiosity for language and culture and improve students' overall cultural and linguistic competencies through reading.

Overview

In Chapter One, I have examined the guiding question of *How can second language (L2) teachers help students use their own cultural background knowledge in order to connect language and culture through reading?* I have introduced the four major themes of this project: the benefits of reading on cultural knowledge, students' background knowledge, the types of inferences and potential problems and the role culture plays in these themes.

In Chapter Two, I will take a closer look at the research around the importance of literacy in second language classrooms. This will focus on the benefits of acquiring cultural knowledge as well as provide foundational linguistic knowledge. The role of activating background knowledge and Schema Theory will be examined. I will look at the types student inferences that can be made while reading and why they are important.

Throughout the chapter, the recurring theme of the significance culture plays on language learning will be present.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

Introduction

According to Krashen (1989, 1993a), learners develop their lexicons by negotiating meaning from written texts. Conversely, Laufer (1997) asserts that learners need to reach a certain level of lexical proficiency in order to employ successful reading strategies. For teachers, this poses an interesting conundrum of which to teach first: reading or vocabulary. There are, however, still many gaps in our understanding of vocabulary acquisition and word-meaning through reading (Hamada, 2009; Pulido, 2004). There tends to be an absence of second language (L2) studies in this field and much of what we know comes from studying first language (L1) behaviors (Barry & Lazarte, 1998). Furthermore, the application of background knowledge in reading a foreign language is a topic that has received little attention from researchers (Young, 1991). The studies that are present often show mixed or contradictory results (Hamada, 2009).

Additionally, a successful way of acquiring cultural knowledge is through reading (Nguyen, 2017). As there is little to be found in research regarding L2 reading and

inferences, it is understandable that research containing information specifically about making cultural inferences *in an L2* while reading is virtually nonexistent. While the importance of these findings, or lack thereof, may be well-established in linguistic communities, there are still many schools that do not employ reading for culture or include the activation of background knowledge in their second language texts but rather focus on the cognitive, lexical, and syntactic benefits of reading. The absence of these techniques can lead to confusion and frustration in reading and language study (Young, 1991).

This literature review will therefore seek to address the question: *How can second language (L2) teachers help students use their own cultural background knowledge in order to connect language and culture through reading?* It will focus on how students learn to make meaning from inferences when reading by activating background knowledge. It will also call attention to the problematic nature of making inferences, why students make mistakes when inferring and the result of those inferences. Finally, the role of teaching culture in relation to second language reading will be discussed.

Discussion

Reading. Reading in a first language is a painstaking and sometimes challenging task. This cognitive process involves activating background knowledge which in turn interacts with the text to create meaning (Pulido, 2004). In addition, many linguistic processes are used, including accessing the reader's lexicon, concept activation through sense and reference of the word, and syntactical analysis of the sentence (Pulido, 2004).

For L2 learners, this challenge can be compounded by lack of linguistic and cultural background knowledge.

When inferring meaning while reading narrative texts that tell a story, students tend to be more successful or correct when the subject is a topic they are familiar with (Hammadou, 1991; Pulido, 2004). Additionally, narrative texts, as opposed to expository texts which are often informative in nature, tend to elicit more inferences (Barry & Lazarte, 1998). This may be due to the familiar structure of storytelling or the entertaining nature of narrative texts. The impact of these findings for teachers is threefold: first, teachers may wish to promote the development of inferences by first exposing students to reading narrative texts rather than expository or nonfiction texts. This is especially useful in the case of young learners reading storybooks which may contain familiar day-to-day activities and whose purpose is to entertain rather than inform. Next, by helping students activate their background knowledge, teachers can improve their students' success in inferring meaning. Finally, by familiarizing students with cultural information related to a text and adding it to their prior knowledge of a text topic, students will make more gains in making inferences. The next section will discuss how to engage students' prior knowledge. When teachers provide readers with these tools or strategies, it leads to less overall frustration for students and greater learning outcomes (Young, 1991).

Schema Theory and Background Knowledge. Reading is an interactive process (Young, 1991). Readers, rather than passively taking in information, actually contribute to the meaning of a text (Young, 1991). By using their background knowledge about a

topic, students can engage with text on a deeper level. This is referred to as the Schema Theory, or what I like to call “opening the drawer” to access background knowledge. Opening the draw allows access to prior knowledge and also allows new information to go into the correctly categorized drawer in order to become long-term memory. Readers use their memories and existing knowledge when they read; that knowledge gives meaning to new understandings (Young, 1991). Carrell (1987) distinguishes between two types of schemata: content and formal. The focus of this paper will be on *content* as it applies more directly to the meaning of a text rather than the way it is written and also has been viewed as more important than form (Carrell, 1987).

Pulido (2004) found that students who were familiar with the cultural context of read scenarios were able to construct meaning and make correct inferences more easily because they had a “cognitive foothold” (p. 14). This is an important tool to consider when second language teachers include culture in their lessons. Nguyen (2017) suggests that when students develop their cultural awareness, they engage and create new cultural schemata, both of their own source culture and of the target culture. Teachers can therefore activate students’ schemata by opening the “prior knowledge drawer” through pre-reading strategies. Without this, very little new information will make it into the drawer, the existing schema.

In addition to the cognitive benefits of activating students’ background knowledge, it also increases independence (Young, 1991), which is an important goal especially for teachers of young language learners. It also can improve students’ linguistic abilities, such as fluency and accuracy in speaking, although background

knowledge may be just as important as linguistic knowledge (Young, 1991). Pulido (2004) offers one explanation for this: readers with strong prior vocabulary knowledge of culture will glean more benefit from reading a text, or “the rich get richer” (p. 2). If the ultimate goal is language fluency, it seems that Pulido’s formula offers an appropriate solution: background knowledge plus attention equals richer analysis which leads to long-term memory activation which helps the target language become more readily accessible when needed.

There are several ways that teachers can help students activate their background knowledge. Barry & Lazarte (1989) found that readers create a mental model which includes using information directly located in the text, inferring meaning, and linking the text to prior knowledge. Hamada (2009) suggests that readers also use global strategies which are based on context rather than word knowledge in order to engage their prior knowledge when reading. Language teachers can walk new readers through these stages of using context or specific text-based clues as they become more fluent and confident in making inferences using their schemata. As a post-reading activity, teachers can have students compare their pre-reading assumptions to what they have learned in order to contrast their new or modified schemata with their original ones (Young, 1991).

Inferences. Defining word-meaning inference is useful before I continue. Hamada (2009) defines it as making informed guesses using linguistic cues and a learner’s general knowledge and awareness of content. Barry & Lazarte (1998) specify three types of inferences: within-text, elaborative and incorrect. Each type of inference tends to be employed by different kinds of learners when reading different kinds of texts

such as fiction or nonfiction texts. To contribute to that idea, Hamada (2009) designates two main strategies that L2 learners employ; these correspond to these Barry & Lazarte's definitions: local strategies and global strategies. Local strategies, which can be compared to within-text cues, involve figuring out word meaning through morphology such as suffixes and syntax or word order. Conversely, global strategies, which are similar to elaborative cues, involve using the context clues of a sentence to make meaning.

When students are asked to infer meaning from texts and employ these strategies, Fincher & Kiefer (1992) found that low, middle and high level readers were all able to use local analysis, however only the high level group correctly used global inference. Additionally, they hypothesised that higher level readers may have the goal of creating a mental model built on the text and their own background knowledge. This proposition seems to support Schema Theory and other claims that higher level readers benefit from activating background knowledge. Hamada (2009) agrees that these types of activities as well as metacognitive strategies are in fact effective for all readers. Lower level readers benefited from specific word-meaning training in employing both local strategies such as morphological and syntactical analysis and word-analogy, as well as global strategies such as using context to dive deeper into text meaning combined with world knowledge (Hamada, 2009).

Incorrect Inferences. In addition to in-text and elaborative inferences, the third type of inference that Barry & Lazarte (1998) discuss is those that are unsuccessful or incorrect. They found particularly that lower level readers tended to infer meaning less

often, however, when the complexity of the text was increased, this group of readers made more inferences but they were often incorrect (1998). Pulido (2004) found that when readers were unfamiliar with a cultural event in a text, they used their own schemata to fill in the blanks. For example, if students from Spain read about a storm in Minnesota, they might assume it referred to a rainstorm rather than a snowstorm since they are not likely to be personally familiar with such a concept. Carrell (1987) also found that a lack of background knowledge about other cultures leads to “inappropriate cultural distortions, frequently outright intrusions” from the source culture of the reader (p. 462). For language learners of all ages, this can lead to complications in future communication with native or fluent speakers if their understanding of the culture comes not from actual information but from invented assumptions. The possibility for miscommunication and misunderstandings may arise due to these incorrect inferences.

What this means for a second language teacher who wishes to teach culture through reading is that lower level readers may require more direct instruction on how to use inference when reading. Perhaps on a broader scale, it means that students of all levels need to have a basic cultural understanding of the texts they read if they are going to make correct inferences based on the target culture and language.

Culture. As second language teachers, it is valuable to realize that “language competence and culture are intimately and dynamically connected” (Nguyen, 2017, p. 146). In practical terms, this means that increasing students’ cultural competence will improve their linguistic abilities and vice-versa (Rodriques, 2000) as their background knowledge grows. In other words, teachers simply cannot leave out teaching culture if

they want their students to fully develop an understanding of the target language.

Therefore, one of the strategies that teachers can use in order to help learners develop their cultural knowledge is through reading about the target culture. A language teacher's cultural objectives might include learning about the culture, developing the skills required to engage with that culture as well as tolerance and empathy (Larzén, 2005). In order to fully understand these cultural goals, it is important to further define the three stages of cultural understanding as stated by Nguyen (2017): cultural knowledge, cultural awareness, and cultural competence.

Cultural knowledge. The first outcome, the pursuit of cultural knowledge, sees students develop a more positive perspective and tolerance of the target culture as well as an understanding of their own culture (Lado, 1964). For developing readers, this token understanding of a culture may be sufficient in order to engage their schemata related to the content. According to Carrell (1987), a reader who is familiar with the cultural heritage present in a text should be able to read and comprehend it better. Steffenson et al. (1979) also found that readers enjoy more success at making inferences when they are familiar with the cultural events in the text.

Learning about a country's food, customs, and festivals can be engaging for students. This is a valuable starting point for discussion and exploration into the target cultures. Unfortunately, many language teachers stop here, when students have learned only superficial knowledge about culture with a small "c" (Han, 2010). This may be due to teachers' own cultural competence ending here. A valiant goal for these teachers would be to continue to learn alongside their students to deepen their own knowledge of

the cultures they teach. When the teacher and students are satisfied with learning only surface level cultural information, the learning is incomplete. These often-times trivial examples are better described as stereotypes of culture that do not do justice to the complexities of a language or its communities. Therefore, the responsibility of helping students acquire knowledge of cultural content that is rich and appropriate falls on the teacher (Carrell, 1987). Furthermore, a language teacher who deeply appreciates the cultures of the language he or she teaches has a responsibility to teach about more than simply token cultural elements. Another problem with the cultural knowledge only approach is that learning basic facts does not help students' develop critical thinking. The knowledge is transmitted by someone else, rather than the learner (Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2004). This means that readers' schemata and personal connection to the text may not be engaged. In order to apply students' personal experiences, teachers should continue to dive deeper and attempt to develop students' cultural awareness.

Cultural awareness. The second stage to learner understanding, cultural awareness, includes what Piątkowska (2015) calls a contrastive approach where students compare the source culture to the target culture and draw similarities and differences. This is when students' perceptions of the target culture begin to change and we begin to see developments in understanding of both the source culture and the target culture (Fenner, 2000). At this stage in reading fluency, students may also begin to be able to tackle more authentic texts. The goal, therefore, should be to continue pushing readers to understand culture more fully.

Cultural competence. In assisting students in reaching the ultimate goal for cultural understanding, cultural competence, using authentic texts that are rich in the target culture may be the most effective source for expanding student knowledge (Young, 1991). This is the crux where students develop intercultural communication strategies for authentic communication (Piątkowska, 2015), which Nguyen (2017) asserts is the ultimate goal for any language classroom. How teachers can assess students' learning of culture will be addressed in Chapter Three.

Conclusion

When language learners read, they make inferences about vocabulary, general theme and culture. Within linguistic and language instruction communities, it is well-established that readers who first activate their prior knowledge are able to make meaning more easily than readers who do not. This extends especially to cultural inferences because readers without the appropriate cultural background may make erroneous connections with their own culture. These inferential mistakes can lead to confusion and frustration on the part of the reader and may also concrete the wrong ideas in the long-term memory, causing future communication problems. Language teachers can take advantage of the engaging and facilitating properties of teaching culture through reading in their classrooms. They can find success through employing pre-reading activities which engage students' schemata, direct instruction of inference strategies and the use of authentic texts to maximize learning.

In Chapter Three, I will provide an overview of my capstone project:

Read-Alouds and Cultural Activities for the Elementary Spanish Teacher. It will make

connections with research findings and my professional experience in using read-alouds to teach language and culture to young L2 learners. I will identify the intended audience and setting for the project. Using Understanding by Design, a design process focused on student understanding, as well as the ACTFL standards for language learning as my guides, I will describe the strategies that can be incorporated into a thematic unit plan in order to help students improve their linguistic and cultural competences.

CHAPTER THREE

Project Description

Introduction

This project seeks to answer the question: *How can second language (L2) teachers help students use their own cultural background knowledge in order to connect language and culture through reading?* I am concerned with how second language learners use inferences when reading in order to improve their understanding of the target language and culture. I am also interested in how they use their own background knowledge of culture and apply it to what they have read. These are two of the questions guiding this capstone. In Chapter Two, I highlighted the literature related to the benefits of reading on both linguistic and cultural acquisition in second language (L2) classrooms. I looked at Schema Theory and the importance of activating students' background knowledge of a cultural event in pre-reading activities. I also examined how readers make inferences to texts and the different types of inferences they make. Finally, I explored the role of culture in second language classes and the value it can have on reading in an L2.

In Chapter Three, I dives into the project of reading for cultural inferences. I will highlight how the current research supports my professional experience and rationale in choosing this project. The proposed audience and setting for the project will be identified. The curricular design based on the Understanding by Design (UbD) framework for activities and assessments will be explained. Using a backward planning approach, I will lay out the pre- during- and post-reading strategies as well as assessments that Spanish language and immersion teachers can use in order to help their students gain confidence in making cultural inferences and ultimately, cultural competence.

What the Literature Means

In examining the literature related to reading, background knowledge, inferences and culture, it is beneficial to highlight a few of the most important themes as they related to this project:

In terms of scholarly work, there has been a lack of research on L2 reading (Young, 1991) and this research has often been contradictory (Mason, 2013). Not surprisingly, there has been even less research on L2 reading specifically for culture. This could indicate a need for L2 teachers and researchers to think along the same lines regarding the benefits of reading on students' cultural knowledge. This would lead them to examine just how students glean cultural information from texts as well as perceive subtleties while reading in a second language. Since there is still not a clear consensus about how students actually learn vocabulary and grammar from an L2, the findings on reading for culture also remain unclear. In my professional experience, I have witnessed the positive effects of literature on students' language acquisition and cultural

understanding. It is for that reason that I became interested in teaching culture through read-alouds.

Some studies have found that the type of text that teachers choose may affect how readily students can understand them. Narrative texts, for example, tend to be easier to access than expository, i.e. non-fiction texts (Hammadou, 1991; Pulido, 2004). Many popular children's books are fictional and relatable for young learners. It is perhaps for that reason that language learners are more successful in making inferences while reading fiction texts whose themes are familiar (Barry & Lazarte, 1998). Teachers of young learners have experienced how their classes make connections to big picture or global ideas presented in stories. L2 teachers can also observe that students' understanding of lexis, syntax, and phonology improve through reading (Krashen, 1982). The piece that is often missing from the research is how knowledge of countries and their peoples can grow from reading these stories.

Current consensus of second language teaching is that it does not happen in a bubble. Students develop both their linguistic and cultural competencies in tandem (Rodrigues, 2000). While there has been a decided move towards integrating culture into language classrooms (Dema, 2012), it is interesting to observe that many teachers do not include both in their language classes. In some Spanish and French classes that I have observed, culture is taught in English, rather than the target language, if at all. This is detrimental for two reasons: First, it decreases the students' exposure to the language, which should be a primary goal in any L2 classroom (Krashen, 1982). Second, it robs students of the opportunity to experience the underlying nature of the language and its

peoples through authentic materials such as newspaper articles, music and books (Young, 1991). By using texts that are written by Spanish-speaking authors in Spanish about the products, practices and perspectives of their communities, young learners will gain a richer understanding of both language and culture. It is therefore essential for teachers to strive incorporate increasingly more authentic materials and explicitly teach about them in order to increase students' background knowledge of the target culture.

Students whose own rich background knowledge has been activated prior to learning will gain more benefit from vocabulary-focused instruction (Pulido, 2004) because it helps them make connections to ideas and lexical items. Similarly, as second language learners add to their knowledge of the L2, understanding of their own source culture is activated. The joining of source and target cultures interacts to form a new schema or thought pattern (Nguyen, 2017). By piquing learners' curiosity about the new country, community or people, they naturally make comparisons to their own lives and experiences, which leads to a greater self-awareness (Dema, 2012). According to Schema Theory, this deeper connection to learning will activate students' prior knowledge or "open the drawer" to future learning and retention of information (Carrell, 1987; Piaget, 1952). By engaging students in pre-reading strategies such as showing pictures and asking students to compare what they see to their own lives, teachers can help ensure that more correct inferences during reading will be made and thus students will gain and retain more cultural knowledge (Carrell, 1987). This project laid out several activities to improve this learning, such as metacognitive strategies that invite students to think not only about *what* they are learning but also *how* (Hamada, 2009).

As a cautionary note, teaching about trivial or stereotypical aspects of culture may be tempting for a second language teacher. However, learning token cultural facts does not encourage critical thinking nor connect with personal experiences (Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2004). These superficial learnings, while usually fun and easy for teachers to plan, do not provide students with linguistic or cultural sustenance for their knowledge to grow on and may be detrimental to inference-making and literacy growth. Only by truly engaging with the source culture through authentic texts and student-centered activities that activate students' schemata will they become fluent L2 speakers and culturally competent individuals. Activities that allow for inquiry-based learning where students actively construct meaning and are at the center of their own learning were the focus of this project (Dema, 2012).

Rationale

The primary reasons for choosing this project stem from my experience as a teacher of young children for many years. I have always delighted in their responses when it is story time. Intuitively, I knew that read-alouds were good for imagination, language acquisition and seeing language in context. The research I found strongly supported my experience. Children's literature can be both simple and profound, giving wonderful real-life examples that the students can relate to. Books provide context, lexical diversity and authentic exposure to language varieties and cultures. They are made memorable through vibrant illustrations and dramatic storytelling (Bland & Lütge, 2013). Reading aloud helps the audience become curious listeners and activate their schemata, e.g., make personal connections to their own lives, other learning and universal

concepts. Bland & Lütge (2013) describe how reading provides children a map for the world, providing creative, emotional opportunities as well as linguistic ones in order to develop students' sense of culture. Additionally, hearing stories read aloud increases students' own reading abilities. My hope is that, as Krashen (2013) suggests, through gaining confidence in listening to stories read aloud, students may explore books on their own, especially graded readers; while graded readers do not usually fall under the category of "authentic texts," they can be used to increase literacy and curiosity about culture and language.

Another important aspect of read-alouds is what Harvey and Goudvis (2007) refer to as "Think Alouds" where the teacher helps students make connections to their own lives, families, fears and realities. Students should be allowed and encouraged to interact with the book in order to make these connections real. All of these aspects help in lowering the affective variable and make language acquisition more enjoyable (Krashen, 1982). When addressing Culture with a capital C (Han, 2010), these think-alouds are critical for guiding students to a deeper understanding of the language, countries and peoples they are studying.

As a language teacher, I therefore have always included read-alouds in my classes. Oftentimes, however, I have struggled to find an appropriate book for the cultural topic or linguistic aspect I wished to focus on. Over the past four years, I have done extensive research into storybooks in translation as well as original Spanish language materials. As my teaching experience grows, I add new books and activities to the list. It is far from complete and I hope to add activities and books to it as my own experience

with literature and culture grows. My goal is that this list of read-alouds and activities will facilitate conversations about language and culture in the Spanish language or immersion classroom.

Another aspect to consider when using literature as a teaching tool is how to best take advantage of the wealth of information it offers. By creating a step-by-step plan using the Understanding by Design (UbD) framework that teachers can follow, several goals were accomplished: (a) students are placed at the center of their learning by making connections to their own lives beyond school. This is ideal for second language learning, as one of the end goals is for students to be able to thrive in environments where the language they are learning is spoken and written; (b) backward design helps teachers see the steps they need to take in order for students to reach the goal, such as understanding a particular cultural concept. By planning the type of assessment first, whether it be a role-play or written test, teachers will have a more informed idea of how to teach a concept through literature; (c) learning is based on standards and assessments. While it may initially seem challenging to assess whether a student has fully understood a perspective that is presented in a read-aloud, the UbD stages paired with the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) standards provide a clear guide.

Setting and Audience

The intended setting for the use of *Read-Alouds and Cultural Activities for the Elementary Spanish Teacher* is the elementary Spanish language or immersion classroom. The storybooks range in complexity of theme and linguistic elements. This is so that they may be utilized in lower levels to introduce cultural concepts or explored

more deeply in higher levels. This concept is what Bland and Lütge (2013) refer to as “multilayered literature” (p. 6). Through revisiting the text a second time later in the year or in higher grades, students will be encouraged to make comparisons to their source language and cultures; these comparisons will lead to critical thinking and stronger connections to the text (Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2004).

This project will be beneficial to Spanish language or Spanish immersion teachers who wish to incorporate storybooks as read-alouds that help their classes gain linguistic and cultural competence as well as literacy skills. Through pre-reading activities that activate background knowledge and post-reading activities that engage critical thinking, teachers will be encouraging their students to make comparisons of the target language and culture to their own (Piątkowska, 2015). The interactive process of hearing and responding to a story will improve students’ cultural and linguistic competence as well as aid in language acquisition through improved long term memory techniques (Young, 1991). This tool will further help Spanish language teachers who teach in several grade level classrooms and must travel to each; it will minimize the amount of planning and transporting books to and from multiple classes every day.

Project Description

This capstone project takes the form of a curricular plan for Spanish language or immersion teachers. It consists of a detailed description of the procedures for using a variety of children’s literature to teach language and culture to young learners. Using the Understanding by Design stages and the ACTFL standards, it presents activities and assessments at each phase of the reading lesson that are suitable for use with read-alouds

in the elementary classroom. The suggested pre-reading activities aim to activate students' prior linguistic and cultural knowledge, thus creating a strong cognitive foundation for learning. The during-reading activities further call on students' noticing abilities and their skills at making comparisons to the story and their own lives. The post-reading activities are designed to improve students' critical thinking, long-term memory formation, and engagement with the literature. Assessments are age-appropriate, standards-based and attainable for all students.

The Books. The works of children's literature in this project fall into two categories: authentic Spanish children's stories and translated stories from other languages. Both types of read-alouds can be immensely useful in a second language classroom. By using stories that have been translated from other languages, children are able to make connections to their source languages and cultures. For example, when we read *La oruga muy hambrienta*, (*The Very Hungry Caterpillar*) by Eric Carle, many English-speaking children have a strong connection to the vibrant colors and repetition of this book, which makes "opening the drawer" to their own schemata easier. Since children already have a foundation of the theme and plot of the story, the teacher can move on to making comparisons to Hispanic culture such as: Is Sunday the first day of the week on Spanish calendars? Which foods would the caterpillar be likely to eat in Spain, Cuba or Mexico?

The second type of literature, authentic children's books, open young learners up to a world of people, places and events to which they would not have exposure otherwise (Young, 1991). Through the magic of read-alouds, students can visualize dancing *el*

fandango in Seville, hearing *el tambor* in the tropical rainforests of Cuba or tasting *tamales* in Guadalajara at Christmastime. Another important benefit of using authentic texts is that it introduces students to Hispanic heroes and heroines from history and modern times. Reading about Frida Kahlo's life and art can be an illuminating first step into learning about Mexican art. Reading Alex Rodriguez's autobiography of a young baseball player can help students realize that Hispanic people and culture do not exist only in foreign countries.

Texts such as biographies can be classified as expository texts. These texts are often informative and can be used to teach a variety of cultural and linguistic lessons including the art, history and food of a people. The temptation might be to use these types of books to teach about the more complex concepts of products, practices and perspectives. For young learners, however, this may not be the best choice. These L2 learners tend to make meaning from stories that resonate for them. In this case, reading a book describing the history of the Spanish dance *el fandango* might be less accessible than a narrative text about the same concept. Texts that are story-like in nature encourage readers to make more inferences than they would while reading informative texts. (Barry & Lazarte, 1998). Additionally and not surprisingly, readers will experience more success in comprehension while reading narrative texts if they are more familiar with the content (Hammadou, 199; Pulido, 2004). It is for that reason that the majority of the books I chose for this project are narrative in nature and tell a story that students can relate to.

Understanding by Design. In addition to the importance of the books selected for young learners' read-alouds, the activities that precede, follow and are interwoven

throughout the reading experience are crucial for helping students understand language and culture. Understanding by Design (UbD) is a curricular framework that informs teachers' lesson planning decisions. This planning format has been a guide for creating activities and assessments of this project. There are three stages to the UbD format: Stage One: Desired Results; Stage Two: Evidence; and Stage Three: Learning Plan.

Stage one. In Stage One, long-term goals for students are identified. These should be big ideas that are transferable to their own lives as well as beneficial in the classroom. For example, I might set the goal of improved phonemic awareness of Spanish names or cultural vocabulary recognition so that students will be better equipped to participate in conversations in Spanish. These are the skills and knowledge that students will acquire during the lesson. For cultural awareness, this may be more difficult to assess, however this can be addressed through the essential questions. The essential questions should be specifically stated, open-ended, relevant to everyday life and should also raise other questions. An example for a read-aloud such as *El Fandango de Lola* might be: How is dance important in Spanish culture? Students will use this and other guiding questions to make meaning during the reading.

Stage two. In Stage Two, students show what they have learned, allowing teachers to gather evidence. While this is considered the assessment portion of planning, it does not necessarily mean pencil-to-paper tests, which may not be developmentally appropriate for young learners. Rather, teachers can use a variety of performance-based tasks, observations and assignments to inform their formative assessment of the standards. Performance-based tasks are particularly compelling since they involve

students using what they have learned in real-life or simulated contexts such as a role-play or writing a letter. Using the 6 Facets of Understanding, teachers will be able to gauge whether their students can explain concepts, interpret information, apply learning to new experiences, understand the perspective of another person, show empathy and exhibit self-understanding. For language learners, all of these goals are equally important so teachers should use multiple means for checking students' growth in these areas. In planning for these assessments UbD requires backward planning. That is, designing the assessment portion of the lesson first and working backwards towards the first activities. Creating a curriculum in this way helps align the standards and makes the lessons more effective.

Stage three. In Stage Three, teachers use the goals and assessments they have created in Stages One and Two in order to write an informed teaching plan. All activities should reflect the overarching goals of student acquisition, meaning making and transfer of knowledge to their own lives. Students should be seen as active participants in the activities, rather than passive vessels receiving knowledge. Whenever possible, students should be allowed to make inferences and draw comparisons to what is read. Whether it is a read-aloud, guided reading or independent reading, literature offers many opportunities for this type learning since students are constantly thinking about what they hear and see. The UbD framework also advises teachers to be responsive to students' learning needs and interests; when choosing literature to share with a class and activities to further engage understanding, students can be asked to vote, show preference and give

feedback. This can be a wonderful way for students to participate in classroom decisions, which builds community, self-awareness and autonomy.

ACTFL Standards. As language teachers think about assessment, planning and goals for their students, there is a need for standards to guide those decisions. The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) standards for world language teaching provides those guidelines. ACTFL breaks down effective 21st-century language teaching into five standards; these are known as the 5 C's: Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, Communities. Each of these can be a stand-alone end goal of a reading lesson, such as reading a book and journaling to make connections to the reader's life. In most cases, however, they are interwoven parts of each lesson that enhance the learning and aid in assessment of those goals.

Communication. Teaching for communication is the goal most of us think of as a language teacher's primary objective. We want our students to be fluent speakers in the target language. The ACTFL standard of Communication reaches beyond that basic goal. Students must be able to communicate in a variety of situations in order to be considered "proficient" in the foreign language. For this goal to be met, learners must become adept at these three facets of communication: interpersonal, interpretive and presentational. Interpersonal communication involves negotiating spoken or written language in order to share information, feelings and opinions. Teachers can gauge success in this area through performance-based assessments such as role-plays. Interpretive communication involves students understanding, interpreting and analyzing what they hear, read or see. This goal is particularly relevant for a read-alouds because students will be working to make

meaning as they listen to the teacher and look at the pictures of a storybook. Teachers can assess this standard through comprehension questions or asking students to journal about what they have heard, read and seen. In presentational communication students learn to present information for an audience. This could be done through a persuasive piece of writing for older students or a retelling a story to a partner for younger learners.

Cultures. The ACTFL standard of Cultures assesses students' cultural competence. There are two main areas that teachers can use to assess this understanding. The area most world language teachers probably focus on is relating to cultural products and perspectives. These are often the food, clothing and artifacts of a culture that are easily seen, touched or identified. For young learners, after reading *Las tortillas son redondas* (*Round is a Tortilla: A Book of Shapes*) by Roseanne Thong, sampling corn tortillas and saying the different foods that they can be eaten with might be as deep as they are able to go into understanding culture. For older students, the second ACTFL cultural standard, relating cultural practices to perspectives, might be the next step. They could explain why tortillas are a staple food in Mexico and investigate how they are made. (They are more complicated and time-consuming than you might think!)

Connections. When students make connections between their language learning and other subject areas, their understanding is strengthened. The ACTFL standard of Connections involves students reinforcing what they know about the world and deepening their understanding through language learning. These understandings can be applied to academic and real-life situations alike. For example, if students are reading *Frida* by Jonah Winter about the life and art of Frida Kahlo, they could make connections

to paintings they are creating in art class. Through this standard, students are also challenged to look at diverse perspectives. Students reading this book might be able to gain insight into the theme of magic realism that permeates Latin American art and literature.

Comparisons. As language learning occurs, students often compare the target language with their home language. This also happens with target culture. By making these comparisons, students are developing insight into how language works and how it interacts with culture. The ACTFL standard of Comparisons asks learners to reflect on the nature of language and culture in order to deepen their understandings. Students listening to a read-aloud of *Los tamales de Ana (Growing Up With Tamales)* by Gwendolyn Zepeda could be asked to reflect on the text by speaking to a partner about their own family traditions, favorite holiday foods and ways in which the family spends time together.

Communities. Finally, the ACTFL standard of Communities promotes students connecting with school and global communities. This can be accomplished by bringing the community to the classroom or by encouraging children to venture out with their families to discover Spanish-speaking communities in their area. Community members could be invited to read favorite books to the class and share their personal connections to the text and pictures. One initiative my class participated in was the *Yo hablo español* (I Speak Spanish) Challenge. Students were asked to use their Spanish outside of the classroom environment then report on their experience to the class. Many students chose to teach a song to a family member; others acted as interpreters at Mexican restaurants;

there were even a few bold students who made new Spanish-speaking friends while at the park or on vacation. These connections to communities encourage language students to become lifelong learners. While this is something teachers cannot readily assess, knowing that we have planted these seeds of curiosity and cultural competence in our students through literature and engaging activities is certainly fulfilling.

The 5 C's of the ACTFL standards provide excellent guidance for world language teachers. Each of these standards can be integrated into lessons using the five language-learning modalities of listening, speaking, reading, writing and thinking. The following section describes the activities of the curricular plan, incorporating UbD and the ACTFL standards.

The Activities. The criteria of using Understanding by Design (Ubd) to create a curriculum and the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) standards to assess progress were essential tools for writing this project. Using backward planning and keeping end goals in mind, the activities themselves have been created in order to aid students' linguistic and cultural growth.

Pre-Reading. Through pre-reading strategies, readers activate their prior knowledge or schemata. In the context of second language classrooms, this involves drawing upon students' lexicons and knowledge of syntax but also their cultural knowledge. In this project, I have drawn on the research on children's development, language learning and literacy as well as my experience as a language teacher. These are the proposed pre-reading activities that will engage students in cultural topics and linguistic features in order for improved comprehension to occur:

Using Pictures. Teachers can show students the book cover, pictures from inside the book or images from other sources for multiple activities. Here, showing previously read books will help activate background knowledge and make connections to past lessons. Students can describe what they see to a partner. Younger learners might use colors and shapes to describe a scene while older learners might be able to make comparisons to aspects of their lives. Students can make predictions about events in the story based on what they see. This can also be done with a map of the area where the story takes place. Previewing places on a map, describing pictures and making predictions will appeal to visual and interpersonal learners (Gardner, 1983). It lowers the affective filter which helps students relax and improves their learning (Krashen, 1982; Young, 1991). Pair work of this nature is the heart of Communicative Language Teaching (Spada, 2007). By using a visual to engage students, teachers are helping to “open the drawer” to a potentially new context that includes a set of lexical terms and cultural events (Carrell, 1987). Children will make connections to their past experiences in order to construct meaning from the pictures and text (Piaget, 1952).

Preview Key Vocabulary and Concepts. Previewing important or frequently used words and phrases through question and answer can be beneficial for language learners. For younger students, this might sound like a direct approach such as “What are some animal words we know?” Once students have provided several answers, the teacher can show pictures and say the names of new animals that will appear in the book. For older students, questions that require critical thinking might be more appropriate, such as “What can you tell about the place in this book by the animals on the cover?” The teacher

can then elicit words about habitat and climate from the class, inserting new vocabulary as needed. These types of questions will guide students to discovering meaning rather than simply hearing the information from the teacher. Students reading alone may not be able to process and understand new lexis without the help of a teacher or a classmate. Vygotsky refers to this as the Zone of Proximal Development (1997); this is one of the reasons a language teacher would choose to use pre-reading strategies to teach terms.

Drill Pronunciation. The United States Army in the 1950's developed a language teaching method called the Audio-Lingual Method. It is based on behaviorist theory and stressed speaking and listening before other skills. In my language teaching, there is a heavy focus on pronunciation because I know incorrect pronunciation is most often the cause for misunderstanding in verbal communication. As a pre-reading activity, teachers should teach new vocabulary by including opportunities for students to hear and say the words several times.

During Reading. As the teacher reads the story, he or she will want to occasionally check in with students to test their level of engagement and comprehension. These interactions will guide teachers towards post-reading assessment strategies that are the most appropriate for their students (Herrera, Perez, & Escamilla, 2015). Teachers can employ a variety of activities that involve questioning, repetition or movement breaks.

Comprehension Check Questions. Teachers can do an ongoing comprehension check while reading the book. Questions regarding the feelings or motives of the characters are helpful for student comprehension. Making predictions can also aid in engagement and meaning making. Students can make connections to their own lives and

previous learnings by using a silent gesture to indicate that they have understood or find something relevant. For example, if they hear the word *gato*, cat, they can make the silent gesture to silently say they have a cat too. This type of activity acts as a classroom management strategy and is especially useful for enthusiastic young learners who love to blurt out connections they have made.

Using Repetition. Many children's stories employ repetition of a word or phrase. Teachers can tap into this and draw their students' attention to it in a few ways. Teachers may ask students to count how many times a word or event is repeated. For example, in Margarita Engle's *Una niña, un tambor, un sueño (A Girl, A Drum, A Dream)*, students could count the number of times they hear the word *tambor* or how many times the girl is told she cannot play. Younger students can keep track on their fingers; older students can make tally marks on a piece of paper or a small whiteboard as well as record any pertinent information. When students hear a common phrase repeated in the text, the teacher can cue them in that it is their turn to repeat it. This type of activity relates closely to the Audio-Lingual Method of drilling for pronunciation, however it is being used in context, which improves comprehension and retention of the phrase.

Post-Reading. After the initial read-aloud, students, especially young learners, may have only a vague idea of the story's theme or the plot. Through post-reading activities which encourage comparisons to the students' source cultures and languages, they gain a better understanding of the events, language usage and cultural information present in the story. By conducting an open conversation after reading with the whole class, students are able to clarify their ideas and gain confidence; this additional guidance

from the teacher and classmates is critical to understanding the story (Vygotsky, 1997). These are a few activities that engage students and allow for critical thinking as well as provide a means for the teacher to assess student learning:

Linguistic recognition. Students can report the words or phrases they heard or things they have seen to the class. Teachers can ask if students heard any of the new phrases from the pre-teaching activities. This helps students internalize their learning and make connections. It also gives them confidence as readers and listeners; even if they have not understood every word or idea, they often have understood more than they thought they would. That can be very powerful. As an individual activity, students can record new words or concepts in their journals. These journals can be designated as vocabulary or culture notebooks or simply used as a way for students to reflect after reading. Within each journal, students can use different types of graphic organizers in order to make comparisons of words or cultural ideas such as maps, webs, and T-charts. There are many variations on this idea that could be utilized depending on the levels, personalities and needs of the class. For example, word or culture walls could be put up in the class and added to after each book. Students could be asked to create their own word or culture cards (flashcards) to quiz themselves or others. By offering the choice of writing or drawing in a journal or on note cards rather than reporting to the class, teachers are catering to intrapersonal learners who may prefer to reflect silently (Gardner, 1983).

Booktalk. In addition to assessing students' comprehension of word and phrase structures, teachers also need to gauge understanding of main ideas through asking comprehension questions. Bland & Lütge (2013) refer to this constructivist approach as

“booktalk;” this activity should be student-centered and aid students in meaning making. To check what the class has understood, there are many ways for teachers to structure this activity. With young learners, I like to do a whole class question and answer session, including probing questions related to the characters or plot. Children at this age are often eager to tell what they have understood and they readily share connections to their own lives. For older elementary students, concept checking could be done in pairs to encourage communication. I like to give each member of the pair a different set of questions so that they have to speak and work together to complete the task; this creates an information gap and a need to listen.

Games. Using games that solidify vocabulary and cultural concepts is an effective post-reading activity for learners of all ages (Herrera, Perez, & Escamilla, 2015).

Students will enjoy interacting with peers, moving around the classroom and being challenged to think fast to solve puzzles. Charades is a popular game for movement and quick vocabulary retention assessment. This makes a nice transition activity and can be done with only a vocabulary list (or the students’ memories) as materials. Going on a culture or word hunt is another way to get students up, moving and exploring. Younger students might want to use props such as homemade binoculars or their hands like explorers while older students could use a checklist and clipboard like scientists. For slightly more calm games, teachers can have students classify concepts using picture cards, for example, the students can practice categorizing all images of *fiestas* (parties) such as *el día de los muertos* (the Day of the dead), *navidad* (Christmas), and *semana santa* (Holy Week). A variation on this game is to play *Word/Picture Associations*

where the teacher shows a picture of a cultural concept such as a *tambor* (a drum), and students describe what it makes them think of, such as a similar drum they play in music class.

Performance-Based Tasks. One activity that engages students' imaginations is writing a letter to a character in the story (Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2004). Students can write letters at varying degrees of complexity from a birthday card to a persuasive letter. Emerging writers can draw a picture including a few words. This presentational communication task shows the students' level of comprehension as well as their productive writing skills. Writing and performing a role-play is another classic language learning assessment. This presentational communication activity engages learners on multiple levels. They are challenged to use their comprehension skills while reading or listening to the story. They then need to recall key phrases and concepts in order to retell the story through drama. Students at every age and language level can enjoy this type of activity. Teachers can ensure their success by providing appropriate scaffolding; this might include booktalk, journal work, a graphic organizer and plenty of practice time before students are asked to perform.

Guided reading or independent reading. Krashen (2013) asserts that read-alouds stimulate free reading and are therefore "natural partners" for increasing students' reading (p. 31). Students love to re-read books they have already seen. It promotes confidence and improves comprehension. Emerging readers could be given graded readers that include similar lexical, phonemic and thematic concepts to read at home or with a guided reading group. More skilled readers could be challenged to read more authentic materials

by searching in their school or community libraries for similar books and comparing them.

Interwoven throughout each activity is the encouragement for students to make comparisons between source language and culture and the target language and cultures. Students can do this by making a T-chart or other graphic organizer in their journals. They can then write or illustrate concepts or words they heard and saw in the story. This use of the ACTFL standard of Comparisons could also serve as a record for future word work. These comparisons will strengthen students' concepts of both language and culture (Piątkowska, 2015). However the teacher chooses to assess learning, UbD suggests using backward planning and goal setting in order to inform the teaching activities. By using the ACTFL standards as a guide to assessment, teachers have a clear path of what they want their students to produce by the end of the reading lesson. Students also are told what the standard to strive for is so that they can better accomplish their tasks.

Summary

Chapter Three defined the particular parameters of the project *Read-Alouds and Cultural Activities for the Elementary Spanish Teacher*. It took a closer look at the practical applications of research on reading, culture and second language learning. It described the setting and proposed audience for the project. The personal rationale for the project as well as the professional implications were stated. The two main frameworks that informed the project, UbD and the ACTFL standards were explained. Other vital aspects of the project such as the books themselves and reading activity strategies were each defined. In Chapter Four, I will assess the curriculum and its

effectiveness for Spanish language teachers. I will identify goals for future research and possible expansion of this project.

CHAPTER FOUR

Project Conclusions

Introduction

This purpose of this project was to answer the question: *How can second language (L2) teachers help students use their own cultural background knowledge in order to connect language and culture through reading?* It was intended to provide Spanish language and Spanish immersion teachers with a comprehensive and easy-to-follow curriculum that they could use to teach about the Spanish language and is many cultures. Chapter Three described the project's intended setting, its guiding principles and its key elements. Chapter Four will reflect upon the research and curricular design process. It will examine the implications for future study and the potential benefits to the field of Spanish language teaching.

Learnings

Through researching and writing this capstone, I have confirmed what I have experienced as a language teacher: teaching language and culture through storybooks is beneficial to young learners. There is a host of wonderful authentic texts that teachers of the Spanish language can access to assist in this goal. I have also strengthened by belief

that linguistics and culture are not separate entities but two pieces of the language puzzle and must be taught in tandem. For learners to grow in their understanding of the target language, there must be a focus on people and places, what they say and how they live. While I am often disappointed that culture and language are not taught as one, the research I found backed up my claim of how important it is to do so.

Literature Review Reflection

I was surprised to find that there has not been more research done on the implications of children learning Spanish through the activation of background knowledge prior to reading and the effect it has on their cultural competence. While this is a very specific type of research, I had expected to be able to find more of these buzzwords in each study. For background knowledge and Schema theory, I found Barry & Lazarte (1998) important to lay the groundwork for my research. While many of the studies I found focused on adult learners or learners of other languages such as English, Nguyen's (2017) research on culture was fundamental. While this information was useful for getting an overall picture of how reading and making inferences work, I would have found it more relevant to my teaching to find research on young Spanish language learners.

The practical result of finding research that was similar to my guiding questions but not entirely the same meant reading, discarding or synthesizing a fair amount of data. This involved sifting through articles and books in order to find nuggets of gold that I could use to make my case. I was relieved to find that almost all of what I read supported my intuition about the importance of literacy (Krashen, 2013), culture (Nguyen, 2017)

and activating background knowledge (Young, 1991) on language learning. It also inspired me to continue reading and pushing for more integrated language and cultural instruction.

Project Implications

In my experience, many foreign language teachers teach about culture only on special days and often in the source (home) language. There are a wide variety of reasons for this: the teacher perceives that the cultural viewpoints are too complicated to be expressed in the target language; there is too much linguistic content that must be taught during the academic year so the “optional” cultural items get put on the back burner; cultural knowledge is not assessed therefore it is less important than linguistic knowledge. These teaching attitudes and behaviors are detrimental to students’ learning because they give them a compartmentalized and narrow view of culture. A language does not exist separately from the places where it is spoken; it is interwoven with it and one cannot be understood without the other. It is my hope that teachers who use this curriculum will see the importance of incorporating culture into every lesson. My goal is to challenge their thinking that teaching culture is “optional” and help them see that it is essential.

On a broader scale, I hope that elementary schools will encourage their foreign language teachers to improve their own cultural competences so that they might feel confident in teaching lessons that integrate the lives, perspectives and histories of the people who speak the target language. Administrative roadblocks such as budgets for books or professional development on the importance of culture might be lifted if those in

positions of educational power understood the how crucial it is for teachers to have the proper tools to become not just *language* teachers but also *culture* teachers.

Project Limitations

One of the major difficulties for teachers in using this project will be finding the books. I was able to combat that issue by using my public library. Many of the books were available through interlibrary loan. By doing a quick search of the online database, I was able to have the books sent to and reserved at my local library without traveling around the city to look for them. At times, browsing the actual shelves proved to be the most effective way to find books. All of the libraries I visited had fairly extensive Spanish language sections for children's literature with books in translation and authentic texts at many levels. The city I live in has a library that provides service to many Spanish-speaking families and schools so I found this to be a great resource. However, looking up, reserving, waiting for and picking up the books did take time. Teachers might prefer to use books they already have at their disposal rather than hunting down books that I have recommended due to time restraints. Additionally, for teachers who do not have access to a library system with so many wonderful Spanish books, there simply might not be that many Spanish language books to choose from.

Tracking down the 65 books used in this curriculum could be not only time-consuming but expensive. I prefer to own copies of the books I teach so that I can revisit them several times during the year or allow students to access them as they care to. Teachers' yearly budgets do not often include materials that are outside the prescribed curriculum. I have found a few ways to combat the cost-prohibitive nature of buying new

books for my classroom. For my kindergarten class, I created a class “wish list” of books that parents can contribute to. We participated in a coin drive that awarded us a gift certificate to use in the school book fair. Families can order from our class Scholastic Book Club and earn points for the class to use to buy new books. I peruse other teachers’ libraries to find books I would like to borrow or ask for recommendations. My school librarian was very helpful in offering to order books for the school that I thought were essentials. I have been finding that the limitations of time and funding can be lessened by communicating with those involved in the school and helping them see the value in Spanish language books with cultural themes.

For teachers that struggle to find the suggested books, I hope that they will still benefit from this project. The list of goals, activities and assessments could prove useful if teachers are able to find their own books with similar themes. Many of these books may even be available as free downloadable audio files.

Future Projects

This capstone, which started as a simple list of books arranged by theme, will continue to grow with me as I continue to teach and learn. I intend to improve the quality of the activities as I engage in my own action research, testing their effectiveness with each book. I intend to continually add literature and non-fiction books to the list as I discover new authors, cultural figures and important ideas. As my own cultural competence grows through travel, reading and engaging with the cultures of the Spanish-speaking world, my perspective and understanding will add to the depth to which I can teach each book.

Communication of Project

I intend to share this project with the teachers at the dual immersion school where I work. While it will not be necessary to convince them of the value of teaching culture and language together, I hope that the resource of having books and appropriate activities all in one place will be useful. I also intend to share this project with the librarian so that she can order books that contribute to a well-rounded school library. I have several colleagues who are Spanish language teachers at schools where culture is taught separately, if at all. This project is a tool that they could use to implement a change in their classrooms and ultimately their schools.

Project Benefits

The benefits of this project to learners of Spanish are potentially many. Students will be engaged by the colorful pictures and lively texts of these books. They will see and hear language and culture in context which will make it more memorable and enjoyable. They will improve their linguistic and cultural competences through activities that challenge them to think critically and communicate in authentic situations. They will improve their early literacy skills through activating their background knowledge and making inferences when they read. Most importantly, they will be able to see themselves in the pages of these books, regardless of their own backgrounds and continue to be inspired to learn about, travel and explore the Spanish-speaking world.

The benefits of this project for teachers are also many. Teachers have a year-long curriculum for using read-alouds that offers a variety of book and activity options. These can be adapted for each grade level and class as needed. For busy teachers, this resource

will save time while allowing them to incorporate two essential aspects of language teaching: culture and early literacy. Teachers will find the assessments listed are true measures of students' understanding and they are more age-appropriate, beneficial, and enjoyable for students than pen-to-paper assessments. As an added bonus, as students' engagement increases, teachers will find they have fewer class management issues to deal with and more time to teach. I have personally experienced that read-aloud time is when students are at their most engaged during the day. Books bring joy to my classroom; I hope they will do the same for other teachers as well.

Conclusion

This capstone has been written with the intention of answering the question *How can second language (L2) teachers help students use their own cultural background knowledge in order to connect language and culture through reading?* While the practice of using read-alouds to teach for culture has not been specifically well-established, the research on its benefits continues to grow. Through using read-alouds with thoughtful planning at every stage of the lesson, coupled with the ACTFL standards, teachers will have a tool for improving literacy, linguistic knowledge and cultural competence.

There is a need for more integrated language and cultural teaching in our schools. By providing teachers with a step-by-step curriculum to combined language and culture instruction through early literacy, students and teachers will both reap the benefits by enjoying storybooks together.

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